A Four-Step Process for Accessing the General Curriculum for Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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With the provisions of both the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 1997) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), educators must ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate and progress in the general curriculum, including students with significant cognitive disabilities. Students with significant cognitive disabilities make up less than 1% of the total student population (Heward, 2006). First, the individualized education program (IEP) must include, within the child's present level of educational performance, a statement of how the child's disability affects the child's participation and progress in the general curriculum [IDEA 2004 614(d)(1)(A)(i)(I)]]. Second, the IEP must include "a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals, designed to . . . meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum" [IDEA 2004 614(d)(1)(A)(i)(II)]. For students participating in alternate educational assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards, short-term objectives or benchmarks for each measurable goal must also be specified. Third, the IEP must include "the special education and related services, and supplementary aids and services, based on peer reviewed research to the extent practical, to be provided to the child" and "the program modifications and supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child" must be designed to enable the child to be involved and progress in the general curriculum [IDEA 2004 614(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV)]. These requirements are further bolstered by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB); all students between Grades 3 and 8 are to be tested annually in math and language arts (and in science beginning in 2007). As required by IDEA '97, IDEA 2004, and NCLB, students with significant cognitive disabilities who cannot participate in general educational assessments under NCLB, even with accommodations and modifications, are to participate in alternate assessments. Even for students with significant cognitive disabilities participating in alternate educational assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards, those assessments are to be aligned with grade level content standards for all students (U.S. Department of Education, December 9, 2003).

Yet many educators continue to struggle with how to include students with significant cognitive disabilities meaningfully within the general curriculum. In a statewide survey of teachers of students of severe disabilities in one midwestern state, Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer (2002) found that a majority of respondents did not believe that access to the general curriculum was as important for students with severe disabilities as it was for students with mild disabilities, and that "while the majority of respondents indicated that their students were participating in general education on a frequent basis, it would appear that few efforts, if any, were being made to provide these students with *access* to the general curriculum" (p. 129, italics not in the original). This difficulty also extends to understanding the relationship of alternate assessment to access to the general curriculum. For example, Flowers, Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Spooner (2005) found that teachers reported difficulty in understanding the relationship of alternate assessment outcomes to grade-level content standards. Clearly, many educators struggle with how to effectively teach students with significant cognitive disabilities to progress in the general curriculum.

This article describes a four-step process (adapted from Kleinert & Kearns, 2004) for enabling students to access the general curriculum; in our

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work with hundreds of teachers across several states, we have found this model helpful in assisting teachers align their instruction to the content standards for all students and to ensure that student learning is also matched to critical IEP objectives. We describe each step in detail; within each step, we illustrate the process for Victoria, a middle school student with significant cognitive and multiple disabilities.

A Student Example

Victoria is in the seventh grade, and is included in general education classes with her typical classmates. She is nonverbal and is learning to use an eight-key communication device employing a direct select access mode as part of her augmentative communication system. She currently has a picture symbol vocabulary of around 50 symbols. She is able to answer recall questions when provided with choices using a communication board or eye gaze. Victoria demonstrates understanding of one-to-one correspondence and can match numbers to 20. She uses a wheelchair for mobility and has limited use of her upper extremities. Her IEP objectives include: (a) Identify content-related picture symbols, (b) compose simple content-related phrases using an adapted keyboard, (c) answer comprehension questions using her augmentative communication system, (d) demonstrate one-to-one correspondence, (e) identify more/less, (f) increase time head held up, (g) initiate social interactions with peers and respond to their questions throughout the day, and (h) assist with transfers in and out of her wheelchair.

Step 1—Identify or Link to the Appropriate Standard

The first step for Victoria and her instructional team (i.e., general and special education teachers, speech/language pathologist), as it should be for all students, is to identify the appropriate state content standard. In initially learning how standards, curriculum, and instruction are linked, it is helpful for all members of the instructional team to identify the standard that the lesson plan addresses. Although most instructional activities are developed to address one specific standard, it is possible to address more than one standard in a subject area and even address multiple subject areas (i.e., integrated instruction) within a single lesson. For example, a science activity that requires students to chart data and present findings in an oral report could likely address mathematics standards and language arts standards, in addition to the specified science standard(s).

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The following example illustrates this process with Victoria. She is working on a unit about folktales with her seventh-grade general education peers. The instructional team has developed this unit to address the following state standard: "Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience." Further, the appropriate *seventh-grade level content standard* for Victoria and her classmates is: "Students will respond to and analyze meaning, literary techniques (e.g., figurative language, foreshadowing, characterization), and elements (e.g., characters, setting, conflict/resolution, theme, point of view) of different literary genres." These genres could include, for example, novels, essays, short stories, poetry, and drama.

Once the broad standard and the specific grade level content standard are identified, it is then important to determine what the grade level standard is all about—what is the most basic concept that the standard defines. This is particularly helpful in planning for meaningful access to the curriculum for students with severe disabilities. Kleinert & Thurlow (2001) have called this the "critical function" of the standard, which may be defined as its "essence" or "intent." Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe use the phrase "enduring understanding" and state this "represents a big idea having enduring value beyond the classroom" (1998, p. 10–11). For Victoria, the critical function(s) of the standards(s) may be represented as "Identifying elements of folk (or make-believe) tales" such as animals talk, wishes are granted, trickery is often used, etc. Although elements of folktales or make-believe stories may be difficult at first to understand as "important" for some students, if we think about the importance of storytelling in our culture, and that stories are not always literally true, the realization of that fact is important for all students. Storytelling also represents an important avenue for enjoyment and leisure in our culture and is the basis of understanding much of what we do in our free time.

For students such as Victoria, there are numerous advantages to linking instruction to grade level content standards for all students:

- Setting high expectations for the students in terms of content acquisition.
- Ensuring access to the general curriculum.
- Providing direct instruction on the same content standards that all students of the same age and grade are learning.
- Providing ongoing opportunities to learn each standard throughout the school year, because standards are often taught across multiple units of instruction within and across content areas.
- Addressing a variety of standards throughout the school year.
- Working in a variety of settings with typical peers.
- Embedding IEP skills in instructional activities targeted to the general curriculum.
- Working on functional skills that occur in the naturally occurring routines within these activities.
- Offering opportunities to build friendships/relationships with peers in the context of these activities.

Figure 1. IntelliKeys With Custom Overlay for Folktales

Experts in the field of moderate to severe disabilities emphasize that academic instructional goals should be selected from the general curriculum and activities (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Wehmeyer, 2002). Of course, students with significant cognitive disabilities may have other more "functional" or life-skill needs as well; IDEA 2004 reinforces that these other life-skill needs of students must be addressed. However, whenever possible, functional skills should not be taught in an "alternative curriculum" (Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley, 2000), but rather in the context of the general education curriculum. Having students work within the general curriculum throughout the year on a variety of standards affords a wide range of opportunities to learn and to generalize the key concepts of the grade level content standards, as well as life-skill needs.

Step 2—Define the Outcome of Instruction for All Students

This step considers the specific instructional unit and specifies the learning outcomes for that unit; it identifies what the teacher wants *all* students to learn. It represents what the achievement of the standard will "look like" for that unit or lesson.

Anchoring instruction to the unit objectives for all students can assist the instructional team in prioritizing outcomes for a student with significant cognitive disabilities such as Victoria. If the unit objectives are very complex, lengthy, or highly specialized, it may be helpful to reduce the complexity of what is required for students with significant cognitive disabilities. This may be as simple as prioritizing a reduced number of skills/concepts to systematically teach the student. This should not serve to limit the participation in the instructional activities (which opens up opportunities to learn additional skills/concepts/knowledge), but should focus instruction and monitoring on the selected skills/concepts. In Victoria's case, the instructional team first identified that the outcomes for all students were to (a) demonstrate common elements, origins, and purposes of folktales; (b) examine a Native American folktale and a Russian folktale and identify common elements and differences that reflect the cultures; and (c) modify folktales using various artistic venues.

Then the instructional team prioritized the following outcomes for Victoria:

- Identify 2 to 4 common elements of folk- or make-believe tales.
- Identify one element in each folktale read.
- Participate in a small group to modify a folktale and play an active role in the group.

After selecting the targeted skills/concepts for the student, we must consider the typically required supports identified on the student's IEP (e.g., instructional, behavioral, assistive technology). In Victoria's case, the IEP team has identified the following supports essential for her to participate in general education classes and other school activities: picture symbols; a single level, programmable voice output device with eight keys activated by the direct select method; and an adaptive keyboard with custom overlays designed with 3" X 3" square keys as an input device for the computer. An example of the overlay that Victoria will use for this unit is presented in Figure 1. Victoria has learned to use this device through the systematic instruction provided by her speech-language pathologist and her teachers.

Decisions on *more specific* assistive technology tools should be made once the learning environment and tasks are determined (Zabala, 1996). These will be addressed in Step 3. Considering both the supports already identified within the IEP and the desired learning outcomes will help in identifying the appropriate, individualized supports for the planned instructional activities.

Step 3—Identify the Instructional Activities

In this step, a careful description and analysis of the instructional activities developed to teach the grade level content standards will help to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities have equitable access to instruction and curriculum provided to other learners. Burdge et al. (2001) identify typical instructional activities:

- Lecture and note-taking.
- Cooperative learning groups.
- Research.
- Practice activities and homework.
- Culminating projects.

For Victoria's class, the instructional team has identified the following instructional activities for the unit:

1. Brainstorm a list of folktales with which students are familiar and discuss the common elements (e.g., animals talk, youngest and smallest of

siblings are often successful, wishes are granted, magic objects are present, monsters often appear, trickery is used, numbers '3' and/or '4' are often significant, poor person becomes rich).

2. Read the Native American folktale, *The Buffalo and the Field Mouse,* and have the class answer questions about the tale.
3. Read the Russian folktale, *The Frog Princess,* and have the class answer questions about the tale.
4. Complete the "Compare and Contrast" graphic organizer in small groups using the two folktales (see Figure 2 for how that graphic organizer has been adapted for Victoria).
5. Use the graphic organizer to discuss the differences between the two cultures and how the folktales reflect the culture.
6. In groups of three students, have the groups select a folktale from their assigned culture and find a way to retell the tale, either as a puppet show, skit, series of pictures, or other artistic medium. Then they will create the puppets, costumes, drawings, or other art works together.
7. For homework each student will prepare an introduction to his or her tale, explaining the common elements of the folktale and how the tale reflects the culture.

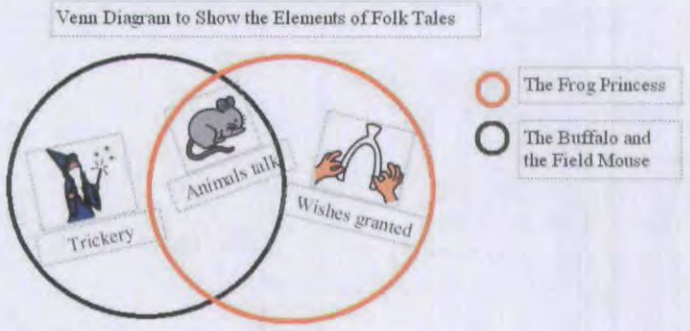
It is expected that Victoria will participate in each of these activities by:

1. Participating in class discussions by using her augmentative communication device to name familiar folktales that she previously reviewed with a peer.
2. Listening as the first folktale is read in class while having pictures or picture symbols that correspond to the characters and settings to engage her in the activity. Having the teacher call on her for predetermined questions in which she can use her pictures/picture symbols to choose her answer (e.g., "What common element of folktales did the mouse and buffalo do that animals don't do?" Victoria selects "animals talk," with prompting as needed).

Figure 2. Graphic Organizer for Folktales Unit

Characters from the folktales are sorted according to the elements of folktales

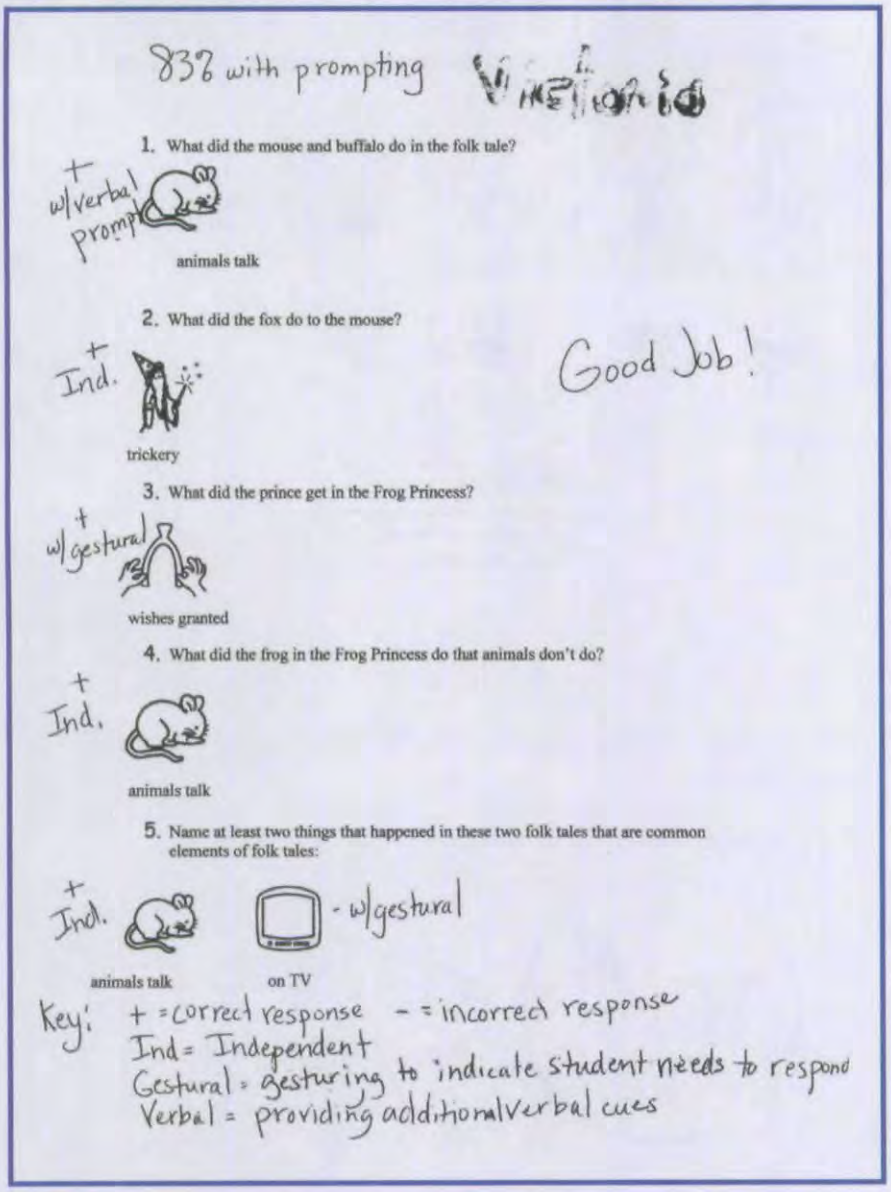
The elements are then placed within the Venn Diagram to show commonalities



3. Repeating as in step 2 for the second folktale.
4. Completing a modified graphic organizer using picture symbols with help from the group (see Figure 2).
5. Pointing to the corresponding picture symbol on the graphic organizer during small group discussion.
6. Participating in her assigned small group, with such adaptations as objects and pictures that relate to the culture and folktale, with peer support.
7. Completing the homework assignment using the adapted keyboard with a custom overlay designed with 8 keys containing the needed information in picture symbol format.

Classroom-based assessments are generally included within general education units of study either as ongoing checks on student understanding or as end-of-instruction tests of student achievement. Both of these are essential components of instruction designed to assess the effectiveness of teaching, providing information on what the student has learned, and determining if additional/different instruction is needed. Step 3 should include at least one classroom-based assessment activity. For Victoria, an example of such an

Figure 3. Victoria's Classroom-based Assessment Product



assessment, tailored to her prioritized outcomes, is included in Figure 3.

Victoria will be asked a series of verbal questions to assess what she knows about the common elements of folktales. So that she may be independent in her answers, Victoria is provided with an IntelliKeys adaptive keyboard (IntelliTools, 2003) and a nine-key custom overlay (Overlay Maker 3; IntelliTools, 2004) using Mayer-Johnson (1998) picture symbols to represent common elements of folktales. The IntelliKeys inputs Victoria's selection to the computer, which is displayed on the monitor as a combination of text with graphics that she can both see and hear through the use of text talking graphic software (e.g., Writing with Symbols 2000, Widgit, 2002). For example, the teacher or peer may ask Victoria, "In both the stories we heard, all of the animals could do one thing that animals cannot do. What was it that all the animals could do? Look carefully at your choices and choose the picture that gives the best answer." Victoria will review her eight graphic choices on the overlay and using her index finger, touch the picture that represents "animals can talk." The pressure of Victoria's finger inputs this selection to the computer and Victoria can see and hear her answer. Victoria selects the "Enter" key (the ninth key on the overlay) to move the cursor to a new line and waits for the next question. After completing the questions, Victoria will provide her teacher with the printed page as a demonstration of her understanding of the content.

It is crucial to understand that the active participation of students with significant cognitive disabilities in general education instructional activities should result in the achievement of the prioritized outcome(s), based on the grade level content standard(s), versus simply "participating in" or completing the activities. Previously, when students were included in general curriculum activities for social inclusion, the focus was often solely on completing the activities as a matter of belonging to the community of learners (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, Karvonen, & Algozzine, 2004). Therefore, the student might have been provided hand-over-hand assistance, a model to copy, or even a separate activity to complete. These types of assistance cannot, in themselves, move the student toward learning the content standard, which represents the crux of participating and making progress in the general curriculum under IDEA 2004.

Once the instructional activities/tasks are identified, it is important to determine the supports that will assist the student to learn the prioritized outcomes. Many of these supports will already have been identified in the IEP under Step 2, but there may occasionally be an activity in which a more specialized or informal support is called for, such as through the use of low and/or high-tech assistive technology adaptations and strategies selected specifically for that activity or unit, or through peer supports. In Victoria's case, the instructional team has identified the following additional supports necessary for her to participate in *this* unit: pictures and picture symbols related to four elements of folktales (i.e., animals talk, magic, use of trickery, wishes are granted), objects that relate to the folktale to engage her while listening (e.g., miniature toy mouse and frog), the folktales summarized and presented in picture format so that she can practice reading them using a text reader, and an adapted keyboard

containing the information needed to complete her project introduction.

As we have illustrated in this example, students should never be denied instruction on concepts because they are unable to access the information through traditional instructional formats, such as reading the text without appropriate adaptations, or because they were unable to demonstrate the learning through traditional means. Instead, the information needs to be presented in a way that is accessible and meaningful to the student (e.g., tactile objects, picture symbols, or use of a text reader) so that students with significant cognitive disabilities have equitable opportunities to learn and demonstrate knowledge.

It may also be helpful to create a menu of support ideas to be used *across* instructional activities. An example might be that when the class is completing a worksheet, the student could match picture symbols to vocabulary words. A complete menu of supports and means of active participation that correlate with major instructional activities such as listening, reading, and writing ensures that meaningful supports are planned and in place for the student, and that these supports are not just occurring "on the fly." *Pathways* (Denham, 2004) is a resource for accessible learning and includes sections for reading, writing, and presenting. Teachers may ask themselves the following questions when determining needed supports for the student:

- *Is the student actively participating in each part of the instructional activity?* That may include reading, writing, speaking, listening, answering questions, doing research, taking tests, and so forth. These activities may be done in the context of different instructional formats, such as group or individual work. The focus is not on *in which* instructional activities the student will participate, but *how*. In Victoria's case, her active participation is demonstrated by participating in class discussion using her augmentative communication device, using picture symbols to make choices, and using an adapted keyboard and custom overlay using picture symbols to complete homework. Of course, participation in the general curriculum does not preclude the necessity of teaching other skills identified as important for students with cognitive disabilities. Teaching both can be challenging; however, by embedding those more traditional or "functional" skills within the context of content area instruction *whenever possible* affords opportunities to do both.
- *What is needed to engage the student in the instruction?* This may not require anything additional to what all students are receiving, but it may be something as simple as the student having an object representative of the concept to hold and identify while listening to an oral reading. The engagement should be matched to the particular learning style of the student and facilitate the acquisition of the content. For Victoria, the instructional team ensured her engagement by providing her objects that relate to the folktales to manipulate while listening and by providing her with additional time with the folktales by using a text reader.
- *Does the student have a means to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and concepts acquired?* Students need to have an established means of communication, understandable by both teachers and peers, to demonstrate what they have learned. Victoria will demonstrate what she learned in this unit by using picture symbols to answer questions.

Step 4—Target Specific Objectives From the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for Instruction Within the Unit

This step may well overlap and have been addressed within Step 1, Identify the Standard(s), if IEP goals and objectives have already been written with the grade level content standards in mind. To the extent that the IEP team has been able to develop a "standards-based IEP" (Thompson, Thurlow, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001), opportunities to instruct, learn, and practice these IEP skills will be inherent within the instructional activities specified in Step 3. The instructional activities that we have just described will allow the instructional team to address the following three standards-based objectives from Victoria's IEP: identify content-related picture symbols, compose simple content-related phrases using an adapted keyboard, and answer comprehension questions using her augmentative communication system.

The focus is not on in which instructional activities the student will participate, but how.

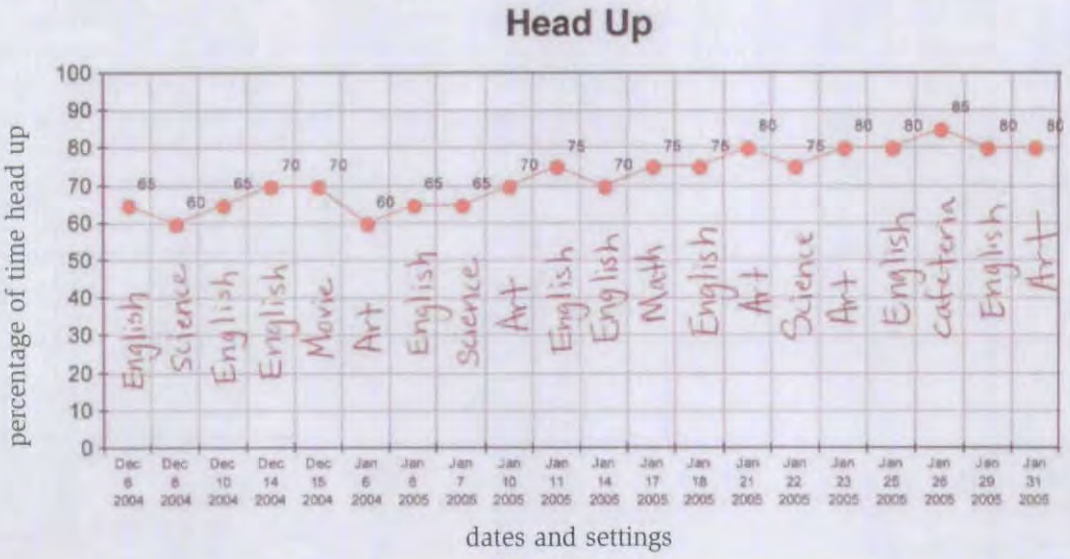
In addition to grade level content standards, students with significant cognitive disabilities often need instruction in basic communication, motor skills, and social skills. However, these have sometimes been taught in relative isolation. What has been missing from instruction is context—*what* does a student need to communicate, *what* does she need to be able to do, and *which* social skills does she need. By looking at these skills in the context of curriculum-based instruction—what does the student need to communicate during social studies, what does she need to be able to do physically during math, and how does she need to interact with others in language arts—these skills can be seen as giving additional access to the general curriculum. Victoria is working on the following basic skill IEP objectives: increasing time that she keeps her head up and using her communication system to both initiate interactions with peers and to respond to their questions throughout the day. These basic or more functional skills increase her ability to both access the general curriculum and to function more independently in the context of her life routines.

By embedding these basic skills within the context of general education activities, the teacher gives students access to the curriculum as required by IDEA 2004 and NCLB, while still providing ongoing instruction on those essential basic skills. This allows for a

Figure 4. Victoria's Graph for Holding Head Up

Student: Victoria

Targeted Skill: When presented with verbal cue, Victoria would hold her head up to attend to the activity at hand 80% of a 10 minute session three out of five sessions.



seamless transition from basic skills to the acquisition of content area knowledge. With the general curriculum as an essential element for instruction, all students will receive instruction within that content. As students with significant cognitive disabilities become more effective communicators, they will be able to demonstrate what they know about that core content. Even though some students may be working explicitly on these types of basic skills, it is important for teachers to strive to instruct and assess students' performance on the content knowledge as well.

Additional Considerations: Generalizing Skills Across Classes and Activities

It is critical that students with significant cognitive disabilities learn to generalize what they have been taught across settings and activities (Westling & Fox, 2004). Providing students with cognitive disabilities access to the general curriculum increases the range of opportunities to practice skills in novel situations. For example, reading and math skills are used throughout many content areas. Reading is used to access information in a variety of situations, such as reading about electrons in science and reading directions for a project in Technology Education. Math skills are often used within academic areas as well—numbers are used to locate pages in a textbook, measure temperature in science, and create geometric shapes in art class, to name just a few instances!

When a student has these types of cross-curricular IEP goals and objectives, it is beneficial to identify when these objectives will occur within an instructional activity. Identifying these times will allow the teacher to provide systematic instruction, as well as to monitor performance. Data probes (e.g., the percentage of trials performed correctly on a targeted skill within a specified time period) can occur within designated sessions during the instructional unit, as well as throughout the day in other activities, rather than as isolated repeated trial sessions. For Victoria, Figure 4 illustrates how her IEP objective of "holding her head up" is being addressed not only in English class, but throughout her school day. Systematically teaching and probing Victoria's objectives across each of these activities will ensure that she is mastering both meaningful and generalizable skills. Of course, that is the ultimate goal for all students—that they will learn not only core academic skills, but that they will be able to apply both core academic and functional skills throughout the activities of their daily routines!

This article has shown how a four-step process for accessing the general curriculum can (a) provide effective instruction and document student performance linked to grade level, academic content standards, and (b) afford opportunities to embed other basic skills (communication, motor, and social) as well as other functional and IEP-specific skills within content area instruction.

Tools that enable teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities to provide access to the general curriculum for their students, and that enable their students to demonstrate achievement linked to grade level content standards for all students, are essential if we are to meet the expectations of IDEA 2004 and NCLB.

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- Spectacular Setting—Held in the living room of a condo overlooking Atlantic Ocean
- A multitude of recreational activities available after workshop hours
- Tuition includes workshop, workbook, 3 breakfasts, 2 lunches, 3 social hours at the end of each day and shared bedroom/bath in deluxe condo.

For information about this unique workshop contact GMS Meeting Management, 2670 S White Rd, Ste 279, San Jose CA 95148
Phone toll free 800-535-2206

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